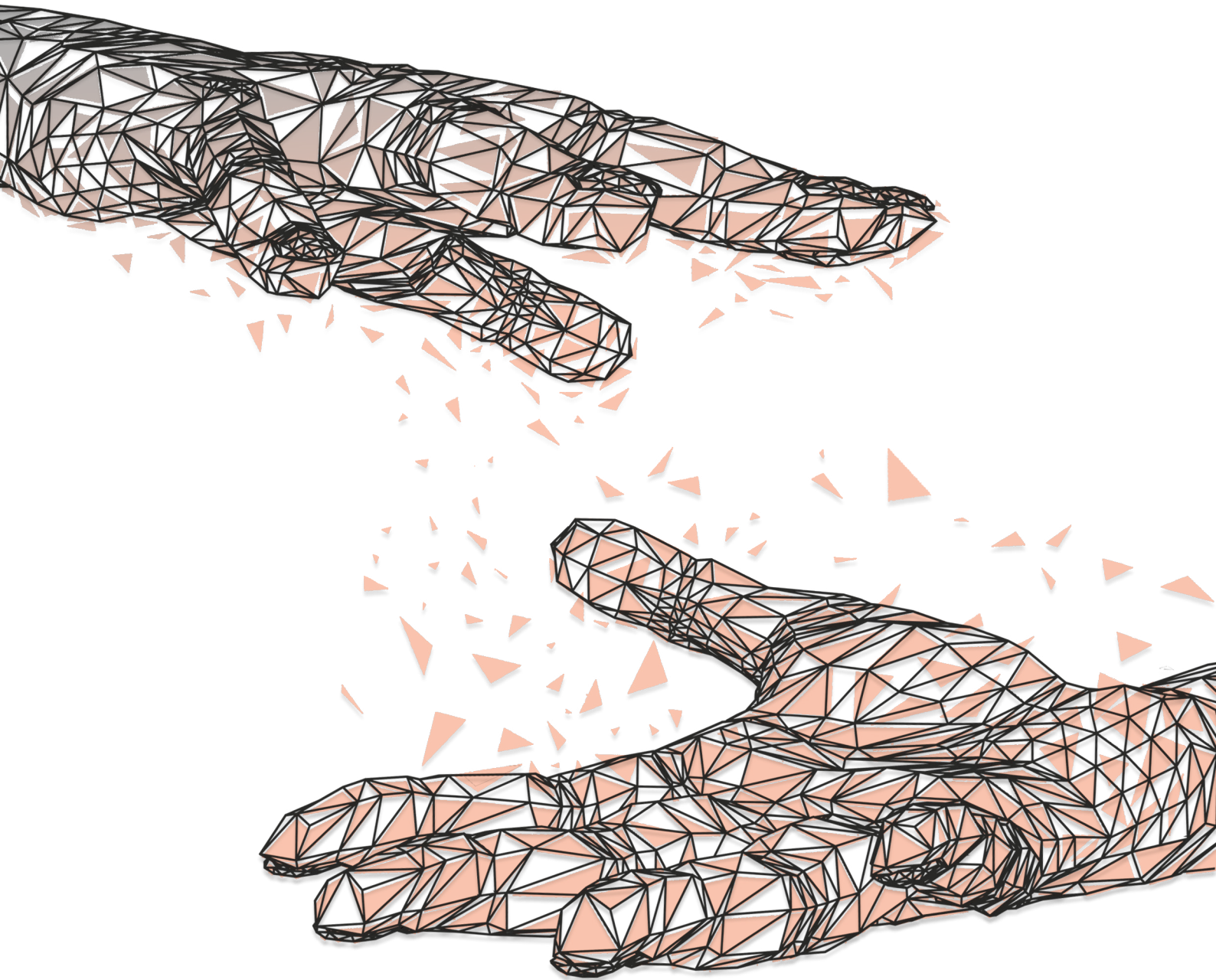


**COUNSELLING PRACTITIONER  
BEGINNER TO ADVANCED**



**DEFENSE**  
**MECHANISMS**

## DEFENSE MECHANISMS

**Have you ever been rejected from a job you wanted? Have you ever been in a social setting you didn't feel comfortable in? Have you ever had a stressful argument with your partner?**

For most people, situations that bring uncertainty into our lives often trigger an unconscious set of 'protective measures' that allow us to manage our daily unpleasant emotions better. In the short-term, our defence mechanisms can be adaptive. In the long run, their effect is quite the opposite. The routine use of defence mechanisms can reduce our effectiveness at processing the common hurdles and challenges that we face in day-to-day life.

This one reason is why as counselling practitioners, it's vital that we become aware of our behavioural tendencies and our own defence mechanisms - so we can better see them in others. Do you enter a state of denial when bad news comes your way? Do you ever find yourself making excuses for your responses, actions, behaviours or lack thereof? Have you ever laughed at a situation where humour was a completely inappropriate response?

If so, these are your defence mechanisms at work in your life.

We use defence mechanisms to protect ourselves from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise when we feel threatened in some way, or when we perceive someone to be bringing our ego under attack. It's important to note that our defence mechanisms are not under our conscious control and are non-voluntaristic by nature.

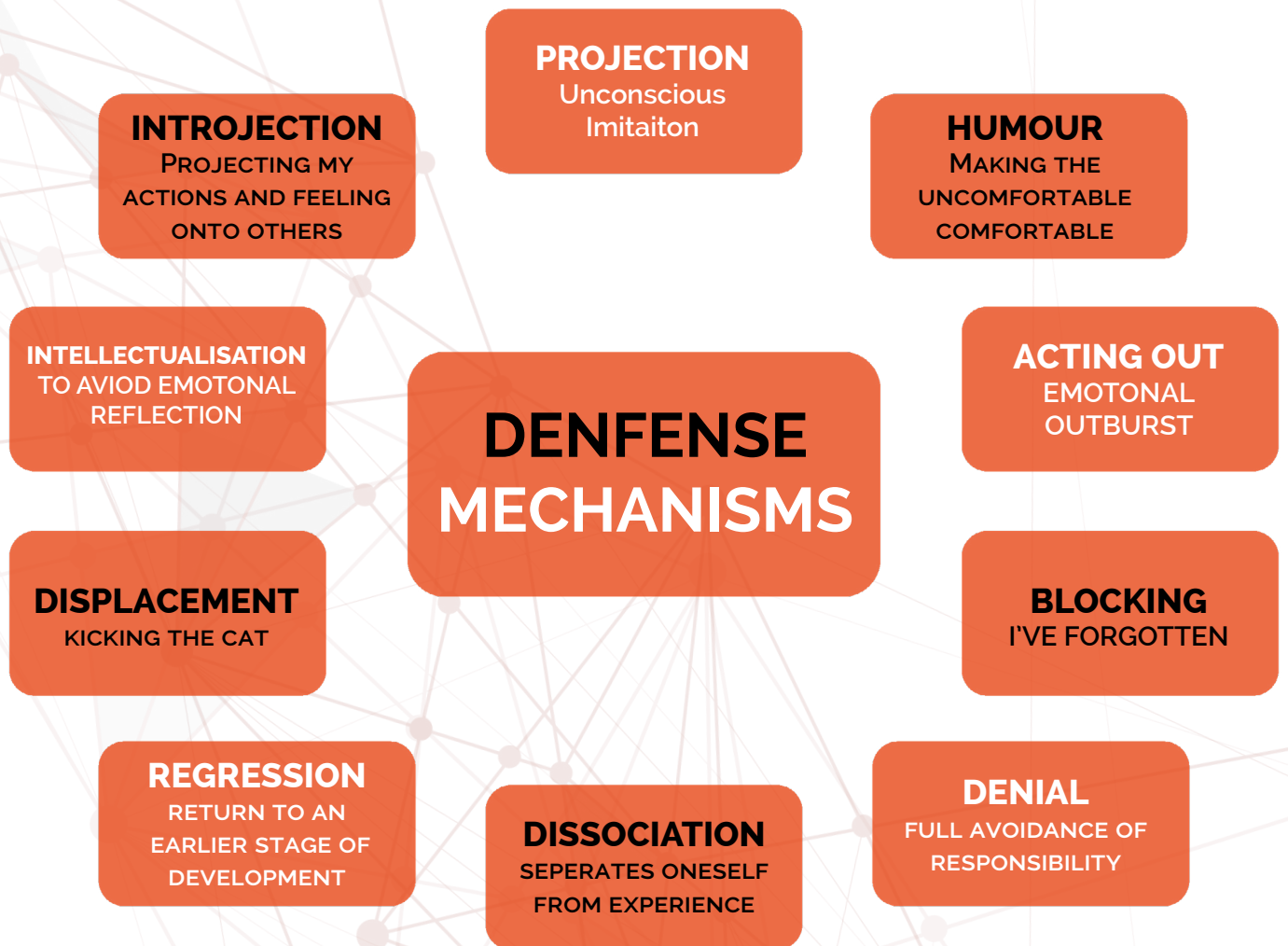
While it's unlikely that as humans, we'll ever rid ourselves of our defence mechanisms, it is possible to bring them under control as we develop ourselves in character and grow in self-control. Think of defence mechanisms as firmware that's been deeply programmed into us since birth. But with more self-awareness, we can understand how these mechanisms help us hurt us, and how they commonly tend to our emotional well-being.

**"The most important element of good communication is hearing what isn't said."  
- Peter Druker**

Let's take a look at some of the most common defence mechanisms that most of us will be able to recognise as being habitual patterns of behaviour in our lives.



## DEFENSE MECHANISMS



### #1 DENIAL

When a situation or circumstance becomes too much for us to handle, we may refuse to acknowledge it and deny the situation's existence. By denying the reality of the events we face, we attempt to protect ourselves from having to face with (or take responsibility for) the unpleasant consequences we are experiencing. If we make up stories to justify our responses, actions and behaviours, this is us utilising denial as a defence mechanism.

It's important to note that while this avoidance strategy might alleviate some short-term pain, in the long run, denial will prevent us from making those positive changes we need to make and will often have other undesired ramifications. As you may imagine, denial is a primitive defence mechanism. No one disregards reality and gets away with it for long!

1. Can you identify situations in your life when you have acted in denial? If so, note down your answers here:





## #2 REPRESSION

There's a fine line between denial and repression. Where denial involves the (often adamant) refusal to accept a given reality, repression involves our completely forgetting an experience (or, the part we play in an undesired life outcome we experience). With repression, our mind unconsciously decides to bury a memory, thereby preventing painful thoughts from entering our awareness.

This is often the case with cases of child abuse or other traumatic events that occur early on in our learning and developmental years. While repression (much like denial), might serve our immediate purposes, (especially for those who witness traumatic experience) if we don't eventually accept and rationally process the experience, it can have adverse consequences later on down the line.

**2.** Can you identify situations in your life when you have subscribed to repression? If so, note down your answers here:

## #3 ACTING OUT

Acting Out is performing an extreme behaviour to express thoughts or feelings we feel incapable of otherwise expressing. Instead of saying, "I'm angry with you right now," those who act out might instead "kick the cat", throw an object at someone, or even punch a hole in the wall.

Acting out serves as a 'pressure release', and often helps those who subscribe to this defence mechanism feel instantly calmer within themselves. For example, children have a temper tantrum when they don't get what they want from a parent. In the same way, adults get angry and break things or abuse people when they don't have a more sophisticated strategy for getting the things that they want.

**3.** Can you identify situations in your life when you have acted out inappropriately? If so, note down your answers here:



## #4 DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is when a person steps out of their perspective and lives life from the standpoint of another to dissociate from the reality of a hurtful memory or life event. Those who dissociate often lose track of time, or themselves and the role they have played in their processes and memories. People who have a history of childhood abuse often subscribe to some form of dissociation.

In extreme cases, dissociation can lead to a person believing their perceived reality rather than reality in actuality. People who use dissociation often have a disconnected view of themselves and the part they play in their world. A person who dissociates will often 'disconnect' from reality for a time, and live in a different reality that's not cluttered with the feelings or memories that are so unbearable to them. Dissociation is an excellent responsibility avoidance strategy.

**4.** Can you identify situations in your life when you have dissociated from an event or situation? If so, note down your answers here:

## #5 DISPLACEMENT

Have you ever endured a stressful day at work, then come home and take out your frustration on your family or friends? What about a time where you argued with your partner, then got in your car and found your patience being stretched with every other driver on the road? With displacement, we transfer our emotions from the person who is the target of our frustration onto someone else or something else that has nothing to do with our original offence.

Displacing our frustrations allows us to avoid confronting the source of our grievances, and shift our focus towards another person or situation that is less intimidating to us. While displacement might protect us from losing a job, burning a bridge, or doing some irreparable damage, it won't help us to manage any negative emotions we're harbouring. Displacement usually ends up hurting something (or someone) who hasn't even wronged us.

**5.** Can you identify situations in your life when you have displaced your feelings onto someone or something else? If so, note down your answers here:



## #6 PROJECTION

Imagine yourself in a situation where you feel out of your depth like a fish out of water. You feel both uncomfortable and anxious. You begin to see that others are staring at you in a critical and judgmental way. Even though these people don't say or do anything that's objectively negative, the voice of your insecurity becomes so loud and overwhelming that you "project" your anxieties onto them by screaming at them, "What the hell are you staring at!"

We all find ourselves in situations where we project our feelings, failures and impulses onto others. One reason we do this is to avoid that particular truth about ourselves which would cause us heartache or suffering. While projection can sometimes positively serve us, when we project feelings of rejection, low-confidence or fear onto others, it can impact us by compounding stress which then prevents us from dealing with the root of our emotions.

**6.** Can you identify situations in your life when you have projected your insecurities onto another person? If so, note down your answers here:

## #7 REACTION FORMATION

With the reaction formation defence mechanism, we transcend beyond denial and act or behave in the opposite way to which we think and feel. Typically, reaction formation is marked by a blatant and very 'over the top' display of emotionally led action. Behavior due to reaction formation is often hugely exaggerated, compulsive and inflexible. Reaction formation behaviours don't vary due to changes in emotion as do natural behaviours.

For example, a father who feels guilt at resenting his child may go above and beyond to express showy love to the child under all circumstances. These behaviours based on fake emotions are often easy to spot. Counsellors often observe reaction formation in clients who claim to firmly believe in something and become unreasonably angry if anything gets suggested anyone else which contradicts these firm beliefs.

**7.** Can you identify times in your life when you have acted in an 'over the top' way to a situation? If so, note down your answers here:





## #8 REGRESSION

Regression is a form of childlike retreat, going back to an earlier stage of development when a person felt safer or where their everyday challenges would be removed by a parent or guardian. In Freud's view, the stressors of a person's past development may be used to explain a range of regressive behaviours.

Regression leads people back to an earlier stage of maturity as a way of protecting oneself from the need to confront a problem situation. Imagine, for example, arguing with your partner, and instead of using mature communication skills, you stomp off, slam the door and give your partner the cold shoulder. Regression is a defensive and childlike behaviour response which often ends up escalating problems beyond what was started with.

**8.** Can you identify times in your life when you have regressed back to an earlier stage of your development? (i.e. acted in an immature way) If so, note down your answers here:

## #9 RATIONALISATION

Rationalisation commonly occurs when we try to explain our unhelpful attitudes and behaviours away. A rationalisation is an attempt to justify destructive or unacceptable behaviour logically. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, rationalisation is expressed as an unconscious effort to avoid addressing the underlying reasons for the initial response.

Rationalising an event, situation or even a failed relationship might help some individuals to 'save face', maintain self-respect or avoid guilt over something thoughtless they have done. In many cases, rationalisation is not harmful, but instead, is a state of continuous self-deception, when a person consistently makes excuses for their destructive and selfish behaviours.

**9.** Can you identify times in your life when you have rationalised an event or the way that you acted or responded to something/someone? If so, note down your answers here:



### #10 SUBLIMATION

Sublimation occurs when we transform our conflicted emotions, unmet wants or needs (our unfulfilled values) into productive outlets. Sublimation is similar to displacement but happens when we manage to displace our feelings into a constructive rather than destructive activity. This could, for example, be musical or artistic by nature. Imagine a situation where your friend argues with their partner and turns their frustration towards writing music instead.

When used to handle a situation you cannot efficiently do anything about, sublimation is a definite form of defence. But when used routinely to avoid addressing an issue that must be resolved to move forward, it can, in many cases, have negative repercussions.

**10.** Can you identify times in your life when you have used sublimation as a means by which to redirect your frustration towards something or someone? If so, note down your answers here:





## DEFENSE MECHANISMS

In summary, defence mechanisms play a considerable role in our everyday lives. Even if we're not proclaimed students of psychoanalysis, it's difficult not to acknowledge the truth that we all engage in 'some form' of self-deception some of the time!

The question is though, can you detect the defensive form of deception that either you, your friends, clients, colleagues or family are using at any given moment in time?

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